The Weird Work of Mary Howitt

by David Haden.

In my continuing search for little-known local authors and neglected folklore of the northern part of Staffordshire in the West Midlands of England, I found a reference to the author Mary Howitt (1799-1888). I soon learned that in her prime Howitt had been one of the leading writers of her period, and indeed the leading foreign poet in America by the 1850s, although today she appears to be very little known even among academics. What follows are some preliminary notes, which I hope may aid others in the future. I regret I have not been able to see her two biographies published in the early 1950s. Before I give a short biography, drawn largely from her autobiography, I should state that Mary Howitt's letters are at The University of Nottingham's Department of Manuscripts & Special Collections, having been purchased in the 1990s. The same University holds an East Midlands Collection containing many books by Mary and her writer husband William Howitt (1792 – 1879). These would be obvious starting points for those with the time and funds needed for a full pursuit of her more macabre and supernatural work, although I understand another half-dozen British archives also hold her voluminous material. Such a pursuit would be a costly and onerous task, and I doubt I will undertake it.

Howitt came of age in rural Uttoxeter and the surrounding district, a comparatively riverine and lowland part of the isolated moorland uplands of northern Staffordshire. Her short book *My own Story, or the Autobiography of a Child* (1845) was the work that initially informed me about her local origin. I found the book to be very vivid and readable today, though sadly the chapter on "Town Customs" is short and notes only three customs. Such things were fading away, even back in the early 1800s. One of these customs is, however, given as a vivid view of the town's annual bull-baiting run and a child's view of it and is very historically valuable. I was then even more pleased to discovered that Howitt was the author of the classic macabre poem "The Spider and the Fly" (1828), for which she is still remembered today and which is still the subject of adaptation and illustration. This spurred me to try to discover more such material by her.

I initially found no survey-essay online, nor anything bibliographic that itemized the whole of her vast output, although after this essay was complete I found a good modern bibliography by Jones (1991). I at first noted that in the 1950s there had been an Oxford University Press biography titled *Laurels & Rosemary: The Life of William and Mary Howitt* (1955), and a Kansas University Press volume *Victorian Samplers: William and Mary Howitt* (1952). Both were found to be long out-of-print and not online. Judging by one review from 1953, the latter book is actually more of a biography than the 'sampler' title suggests. This was confirmed for me by the recent book *Writing Home: A Quaker Immigrant on the Ohio Frontier*, which calls the 1952 book "the best biography" of the couple and their place in the staunch religious sect. My further search for introductory reading found only *Quaker to Catholic: Mary Howitt, Lost Author of the 19th Century* (2010) by a local historian who lives in Uttoxeter, assisted by a ghost-writer. This appears to have made much of her religious conversion to Catholicism late in life, and I cannot find a review of it. There is also the 2008 article "The 'Airy Envelope of the Spirit':

Empirical Eschatology, Astral Bodies and the Spiritualism of the Howitt Circle", in the journal *Intellectual History Review.* As the title suggests, much is made of her husband's strong mid-life interest in and strong promotion of a 'Christian Spiritualism' in the 1850s and 60s.

Unable to acquire any of the above I then went to the source and perused her multi-volume *Mary Howitt; an autobiography* (1889), which is freely available online. Chapter II details her "Early Days at Uttoxeter" while adding little to the local lore found in her *My own Story* (1854). After her marriage she and her equally literary-minded husband went to live in urban Hanley, in my own city of Stoke-on-Trent. There they took over — of all things — a dispensing chemist shop. This rather unlikely venture for a literary couple opens Chapter V, which also includes her eyewitness account of a lecture by the notoriously wild Stoke preacher Mulock (Byron's 'Muley Moloch') operating at his height and his native element. The couple lasted all of seven months of 1821 in the quickly "despised" centre of the smoky pottery town of Stoke-on-Trent, before moving away and ending up in the only slightly less dismal textile town of Nottingham over in the East Midlands. This brief stay in Nottingham — where husband William had come of age — appears to be the reason why the local university there holds most of her letters and a large collection of her work.

By the 1830s her autobiography has the couple down in the leafy and far more pleasant environs of Surrey in the more prosperous south of England, so as to be nearer the London publishers and magazines. The railways were then extending out from London and making such rural/city arrangements possible for writers. Prompted by the publisher's success of her *The Book of the Seasons* (1828), which had deftly presented the English months and their natural signs, sights and sounds, Howitt set about working up her rural childhood memories into saleable material. Staffordshire was the setting for her conventional and profitable breakthrough adult book *Wood Leighton: A Year in the Country* (1836), set in the once-vast Needwood Forest adjacent to her home town of Uttoxeter. As an imaginative and adventuresome child Mary had been familiar with the surviving parts of this ancient Forest. Her other book *Tales in Prose* contains a section giving a number of more or less fantastical "Anecdotes" from her childhood — including one where she is in Needwood Forest…

> "What a horror now fell upon us! The glade was like an enchanted forest: all at once the trees seemed to swell out to the most gigantic and appalling size ; every twisted root seemed a writhing snake, and every old wreathed branch a down-bending adder ready to devour us. The holly thickets seemed full of an increasing blackness, which, like a dreadful dream, appeared growing upon our imagination till it was too horrible to be borne. We felt as if hemmed in by a mighty wilderness of gloom that cut us off from our kindred…"

Howitt's *Autobiography* notes that her child-self delighted in places like Chartley… "It and its surroundings were all wonderfully weird and hoary". Chartley being an enclosure of the ancient Needwood forest, and about as close to the deep and ancient Midlands greenwood as one could get in the England of that period. It was still inhabited by a herd of ancient wild 'white' cattle, today ushered out of the few remaining forest nooks and kept as a key British 'rare breed'. There are other small hints of the macabre in her childhood memories. For instance her early poem "May Fair", a vivid account of the May Fair day at Uttoxeter, there is the line "And these will go

to see the Dwarf, and those the Giant yonder" which adds a small touch of the fantastical. Other poetry reaches out to surrounding places, and had either a macabre or a fairy cast to it.

For instance, her early poem *The Desolation of Eyam* (1827) describes a deadly outbreak of the plague in the Peak District in 1665/66. 260 villagers died, a third of the population, after voluntarily sealing themselves off from the world. This poem was a well-known success in its day and widely admired. *Eyam* seems to have helped to established her poetic reputation in America.

Later Mary also wrote at least one fairy poem set in the Staffordshire Moorlands…

> And where have you been, my Mary ?
>
> And where have you been from me ?
>
> I've been to the top of Cauldon Lowe,
>
> The midsummer night to see.

The above lines are from "The Fairies of the Cauldon Low", found in the collection *Ballads and Other Poems* (1847). Cauldon Low (aka 'Lowe') being quite the sort of ancient moorland place where one might justifiably hope to encounter the spectral, due to its high misty tableland with ancient barrow cemetery. The same book has other fairy poetry such as "Isles of the Sea Fairies", "The Voyage with the Nautilus". These seem lively and well done, and there is also the macabre backwoods "The Tale of the Woods". Of course her "The Spider and Fly" is still famous. Two poems also evince a delight in the macabre nature of the sea and Arctic climes. Her "Delicia Maris" imagines a temple in the northern wastes…

> Great kings have piled up pyramids.
>
> And built them temples grand ;
>
> But the sublimest temple far
>
> Is in yon northern land.
>
> Its pillars are of the adamant.
>
> By a thousand winters hew'd ;
>
> Its priests are the awful silence,
>
> And the ancient solitude!

Her companion poem to this, "Delores Maris", revels in descriptions of monsters under the sea in "viewless caves" and imagines them accompanied by a "ghastly company" of "unburied men with fleshless limbs". There further appear to be at least two interesting items of natural history such as the comic poem "True Story of Web-Spinner" and the doleful pre-Darwin poem "The Fossil Elephant", the latter a lament for the mammoths which also evokes other prehistoric creatures…

> And the hydra down in the ocean caves
>
> Abode, a creature grim:
>
> And the scaly serpents huge and strong

Coiled in the waters dim.

Possibly many more such are to be found in her book collections *Songs of Animal Life* (1843) and *With the Birds* (circa the 1880s). Her "The Stormy Petrel", for instance, has been hailed as an especially fine Romantic-era sea-bird poem, and her "The Sea-gull" has similar but less sweeping qualities. I also see that her "An Old Man's Story" is cited as weird in her entry by Alexander Hay Japp in the book *Women Poets of the Nineteenth Century* (1907)…

> "several of her pieces are inspired by a fantastic imagination, by a nimble fancy, and an unexpected power over the weird and wonderful. Such pieces as "The Voyage with the Nautilus" and "An Old Man's Story" suffice to attest this."

This poem deals with a curse on a ship's captain. Another early writer notes her early Miltonic poem cycle *The Seven Temptations* (1834) as being an unsuccessful attempt to marry visions of 'satanic temptations to sin' with a poetic form appealing to Victorian ladies. Yet, with all this said, the bulk of her poetry is mid Victorian and thus unpalatable today. Her book collections of poetry can certainly appear off-putting, padded with cloying 'religious sentiment poems' of the sort paid for by the Annuals, replete with the ornate '*thee* and *thou'* style of the era. One can quite understand why Howitt was not much remembered for her mainstream poetry by the 1890s-1900s, which were the decades immediately after her death. There was no collection or even appreciation of her more macabre work and tastes. Her sentimental conversion to Catholicism in old-age (1883), complete with a move of residence to Rome, probably did not help her poetic reputation to survive in Britain.

But I then found that Mary Howitt was also a translator. As I have said above, she and her husband moved from Surrey to London itself from 1843 onward. This and her obvious talents allowed her to become the first English translator of Hans Christian Andersen's stories as *Wonderful Stories for Children* (1846), this volume apparently being done on the basis of her having already successfully translated several of his novels such as *The Improvisatore* (1845). The story collection was followed a year later by her translation of Andersen's *The True Story of My Life* (1847), and then *Hans Andersen's Story Book: With a Memoir* (1853). Her first book of Andersen stories was said to have been done in a slightly toned-down form, acceptable to an English publisher and his purchasing public and to reviewers. Only one of the stories in *Wonderful Stories for Children* actually had its plot slightly tweaked, such that that storks are not seen to deliver *dead* new-born babies to doorsteps. A continental Andersen scholar was much later made apoplectic, on discovering '*zis sacrilege by ze philistine Englisherz'* (my imagined words of his), and in the 1950s he effectively destroyed her reputation as a translator by finding about 40 errors. Her translations were the first, and they do seem to have been a little stiff, and may well have been slightly adjusted. But how else could she have seen Andersen published and read by children in England and America during the prim years of Queen Victoria's mid-reign? Howitt also translated many volumes of the work of Frederika Bremer, and Icelandic sagas and Swedish folk-songs as *The Literature and Romance of Northern Europe* (1852). The latter apparently being the first such anthology in English, and thus a seminal contribution to the recovery of the Northern imagination.

Mary Howitt was also editor of a paid-for journal-magazine with her husband, *Howitt's journal of literature and popular progress*. *Howitt's Journal* lasted only two years and was perhaps blunted by an attempt to blend the contentious politics of the day — pro Free Trade, anti the death penalty for criminals — with literary work and fine sketches. But even a cursory glance at the history of this title reveals an evident tendency to the macabre. For instance, Howitt's journal published three tales by another which were much later included in the modern Penguin Classics Gaskell collection titled *Gothic Tales* (2000). These were supposedly by "Cotton Mather Mills", a pseudonym for Howitt's good friend Elizabeth Gaskell. Howitt had first met Gaskell on an 1841 tour of the Rhineland in Germany, where she is said — by a modern feminist biographer of Gaskell — to have aroused Elizabeth to an abiding interest in the macabre by telling her terrifying night-time stories and thus set Gaskell on the path to writing such stories herself. Gaskell's first gothic tales were then published for the public in *Howitt's Journal*.

The same journal also published Eliza Meteyard, who had a connection to Howitt's home place of the Staffordshire Moorlands / Derbyshire Peak District and an interest in, if not the supernatural, then at least the antiquarian life in a high and wild place of ancient barrows and crumbling stone circles. For instance see Meteyard's *Dora and her Papa* (1869), a sentimental but vivid and still readable long children's novel of the work of a Peak District antiquarian — as seen by his motherless young daughter. This usefully records the home, personal museum and surroundings of the pioneering antiquarian and barrow-digger Thomas Bateman (1821-1861).

I should also note here that Howitt was editor of *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap Book* for three years in the early 1840s, a slim oversized annual that appears to have mixed fine engravings with "poetic illustrations". Again this may be a possible source for incidental material of a macabre nature.

As if to confirm Howitt's interest in the macabre, a few years later she and her husband — by then become a veritable London 'writing-machine' duo — also produced a hefty two-volume translation from the German of *The History of Magic* (1851). Apparently her husband and a friend made the translation to occupy themselves on a long ship voyage. But note here that Howitt also took the opportunity to compile and add a wholly new appendix survey of true-life accounts of such things, which at that time must have taken quite some doing in terms of reading and research. She was well ensconced in London society by that time, so presumably had the British Library and possibly some private libraries at her disposal. This professional interest paralleled… "the temporary immersion of both of them in the fashionable practice of mesmerism [i.e. early hypnotism] and spiritualism of the eighteen fifties" (from an old review of *Laurels & Rosemary: The Life of William and Mary Howitt*, 1955). The couple's previously staunch Quaker beliefs had by then given way to an interest in insidiously genteel cults like table-rapping spiritualism, albeit with a 'Christian Spiritualism' religious gloss.

In 1863 her husband published his weighty *The History of the Supernatural* in two volumes, under his own name. One review terms this his period of "extravagant spiritualism", which suggests his interest deepened and not lessened as the 1850s passed into the 1860s. Mary is not credited for this work. *The History of the Supernatural* had followed the sumptuously illustrated

book of "weird and hoary" places, the *Ruined Abbeys and Castles of Great Britain* (1862). This was one of many topographical books written with her husband, although a publisher or sponsor appears to have heavily shaped the end result and insisted on the unfortunate addition of the antiquated long-*S* throughout the weighty text. Even so, this project again confirms Mary's interest in gothic places and their lore. The couple also published a topographical book surveying the cultural history of the then vanishing Victorian-era North London, the *Northern Heights of London* (1869), which may be of interest to contemporary psychogeographers.

Through my local work on the journals of the North Staffordshire Field Club I also discovered that Howitt wrote at least one remarkably vivid topographical / autobiographical article of local interest, beyond the recalling of her childhood in autobiography. The 1896 *Transactions* noted…

> "… articles from Mrs Howitt's pen appeared in the *Eclectic Review*, 1859, called "Sun Pictures", a delightful account of a journey [three nights, on foot] through this country [into the high Moorlands], and giving a charming description of Alton, Ipstones, and the district. I remember the landlord of the Inn at Ipstones was very indignant at his portrayal, and breathed out threatenings and slaughter at the author of what everybody but himself thought a life-like picture." (*N. Staffs Field Club Trans.*, 1896)

I was then pleased to find the *Eclectic Review* scanned and was thus able to rescue, extract and compile the many parts of her "Sun Pictures" (1859) in a single new PDF file. This apparently utterly forgotten 22,000 word work was then made free.[1] I found it well worth reading, and although certainly topographically "charming" in a great many places, the charm is deliciously and seamlessly counterpointed by her obvious taste for the macabre — depicting things like an encounter with a creepy changeling child on a railway platform, an obsessed organist, various lovingly-describing grotesque and curious rural personalities, and an encounter with gypsies carrying a strange mis-shapen woman in their sideshow caravan. Howitt also recounts a gruesome *olde time* murder in the wind-swept Moorlands. "Sun Pictures" has its share of dark among the light. It is out-of-copyright and if abridged it might make a graphic novel or even an *Under Milk Wood* style audio drama/reading.

In conclusion, what is her contribution to weird and imaginative literature? This question remains to be fully answered. But based on my very initial survey I feel able to make some suggestions. Some of her contribution was possibly profound, and yet tangential. By which I mean that it came not from her own creative work, but from her translations and published collections of primary material. Her translation of Icelandic sagas and Swedish folk-songs, published as *The Literature and Romance of Northern Europe* (1852) was a timely and seminal popular contribution. It was the very first of many, on which others would later imaginatively

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[1] Freely available at The Internet Archive. Most of the real names in "Sun Pictures" are omitted or obfuscated under fictional names. She and her daughter appear to have first taken the train from Alton to Biddulph. The ornamental gardens and organ player are obviously at Biddulph Grange, though the place is not named. Then they took the train from Biddulph to Cheddleton or perhaps Leek; then walked up into the hills. After that presumably Waystones = Ipstones, Rams = Foxt; Foxholes = Swineholes; High Stone Edge = the Ipstone Edge; Wyver = Cauldon; then a walk across Wyver Lowe = Cauldon Lowe; across the unnamed Weaver Hills ("to the west … lie the great quarries"); Welstone = Ellastone; Sturton = Alton; they end the journey by entering The Dale = Rakes Dale adjacent to Alton Castle, and they arrive at their summer home base at what may have been the small village of Hansley Cross which is adjacent to Alton. Thornborough Hall may = Alton Towers or perhaps even the Castle, and terming it a "farm-house" may be some jest by the author or some allusion to a common local jest.

build, and which at the time usefully complemented the then-emerging philological scholarship on the inherently weird Northern imagination. Similarly ground-breaking were her early popular and relatively faithful translations of Hans Christian Andersen, which one assumes must have helped to shape the imaginations of the children and young people of the stolid mid Victorian period. Later, her original appendix to her husband's *The History of Magic* offered the world a choice selection of original source texts on the matter. The full story of the influence of her letters and conversation on the weirder side of the imaginative life of the Victorians — on painters such as the Pre-Raphaelites as well as on writers — remains to be surveyed in a modern form and with reference to the wealth of detailed biographies now available.

Her novels aside, in her poetry there is of course the famous and reputation-securing poem "The Spider and the Fly". But there are also a number of other poems of interest such as: the long plague-poem "The Desolation of Eyam"; the fine local whimsy "The Fairies of the Cauldon Low"; the bright sea poems "Isles of the Sea Fairies" and "The Voyage with the Nautilus"; the sinister "The Tale of the Woods" and the sea-captain curse of "The Old Man's Story"; the sweeping Romanticism of "The Stormy Petrel" and "The Sea-gull"; the doleful paleo-horror in "The Fossil Elephant"; and the pair of sea-poems "Deliciae Maris" and "Dolores Maris" (lost arctic temples, sea monsters). There may well be more or less macabre creature poems yet to be found in her book *Songs of Animal Life* (1843) and *With the Birds* (c. 1880s?), or included among her stories collected in children's books such as *Peter Drake's Dream and Other Stories* (1868). There is also Lewis Carroll's parody of "The Spider and the Fly" to note, the poem "Lobster Quadrille" which appeared in one of his famous *Alice* books. Indeed, Howitt seems to have commented on her own famous creation with her later comic poem "True Story of Web-Spinner". It thus seems to me that her modern reputation could be enhanced by a future illustrated or graphic novel 'comics anthology' edition of the poems suggested above, perhaps with a title along the lines of *The Spider and the Fly, with other fantastical and animal poems.*

Further contemporary illustrated books, perhaps newly annotated, might be fashioned from her appendix to *The History of Magic*, or even from her newly-re-discovered "Sun Pictures" (1859) which might be accompanied by a small selection of extracts from her letters and her childhood memoirs. Admittedly, the latter would only have flashes of the macabre and would be primarily topographical and localist.

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